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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KAMPALA 000325

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SUBJECT: UGANDA/DRC: OPERATION LIGHTENING THUNDER UPDATE
(MARCH 30, 2009)

REF: KAMPALA 312

Classified By: P/E Chief Kathleen FitzGibbon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: This cable is a periodic update on the regional military operation against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) known as Operation Lightning Thunder (OLT). This report is not meant to provide an overarching narrative or polished analysis of OLT, but rather offers spot information gleaned in Uganda only, from credible U.S. Mission sources here. We recognize the regional scope of OLT and the fact that our sources may be limited in their knowledge and perspective on OLT. End Summary.

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MILITARY SITUATION
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¶2. (S NF) Ugandan military sources confirm that Ugandan units remain in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They report that there are LRA operating in small scattered units, but that of the two major groupings, one is moving in a southwesterly direction while another other is moving southeast. Ugandan military sources also confirm that most of the Congolese troops have left Faradje, which leaves the town virtually unprotected. On March 29, the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF) killed three LRA fighters and rescued three non-combatants in several engagements. Since OLT Phase II began on March 15, the UPDF has killed 14 LRA fighters, captured four, and rescued 12 non-combatants, according to UPDF spokesman Felix Kulayigye. Information from other sources appears to corroborate these figures.

¶3. (U) Regional militaries continue to coordinate with each other with regard to OLT. U.N. Mission in Congo (MONUC) Force Commander General Babacar Gaye met with UPDF Chief of Defense Forces Aronda Nyakairima in Kampala on March 28. Congolese General Etumba met with Ugandan military officials on March 23 in Kampala to discuss OLT Phase II.

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, in response to Congolese Minister of Communications and Media Lambert Mende announcing that the last Ugandan soldiers left the DRC on March 23, UPDF Spokesman Kulayigye told P/E Chief that the remarks are "accidental disinformation." He noted that that if LRA leader Joseph Kony believes it, then the UPDF benefits.

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POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT
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¶5. (SBU) LRA spokesman David Matsanga flew to Maputo, Mozambique on March 28. Matsanga claims that he will put LRA leader Joseph Kony on the telephone with UN Special Envoy for LRA-Affected Areas Joachim Chissano. We have not had any confirmation that Kony called Chissano through Matsanga.

Chissano insists that Kony must call him (Chissano) directly and regularly if he is serious about a cease-fire.

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HUMANITARIAN SITUATION
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¶6. (C NF) Medecins Sans Frontieres Switzerland's Chief of Mission Laurence Gaubert reported details of the March 15 attack at Banda, DRC to P/E Chief. Gaubert said that about 20 LRA attacked Banda village at about 0400 on March 15. Another group of five, with three female combatants, arrived between 0600 and 0800 to attack the hospital. The LRA was described as well-organized and disciplined, conducting the attacks, which appeared targeted at looting communications equipment. The LRA took 13 hostages, including two expatriate women, and abducted 30 children. The expatriate hostages said that there was no violence during the abduction and that they were able to escape with the assistance of four villagers when one of the LRA soldiers guarding them was not paying attention. Likewise, the LRA did not destroy the hospital during the looting. They took three Thuraya satellite telephones, HF and VHF radios, solar panels, batteries from the motorbikes, food, money, and computers. Gaubert reported that residents of Banda are talking about another attack in which 100-300 people were kidnapped. She cannot confirm that report or the report that an aircraft had landed at a nearby airstrip to drop supplies. Gaubert could only confirm that two people in Banda had been killed. Gaubert said that she believes that the LRA group came only to steal equipment and did not intend on taking expatriate hostages. MSF has pulled its staff back to Kampala.

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MEDIA/PUBLIC OUTREACH
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¶7. (U) Invisible Children, a San Diego-based non-governmental organization, kicked off a worldwide campaign to raise awareness about the LRA's continued holding of children as child soldiers in Gulu on March 27 and 28. The event was entitled "Rescue the Children" and the overall theme was that peace had come to northern Uganda and that Kony must be stopped. The events emphasized that peace has come to northern Uganda and that 80 percent of the internally-displaced have returned to or near their homes. A ceremonial destruction of huts was held. There was also a march, which saw broad participation by local and national government officials, the UPDF, non-governmental organizations, and the diplomatic corps. Over 10,000 people gathered to watch a new 30-minute documentary called "The Rescue of Joseph Kony's Child Soldiers," which detailed the various peace processes that have been attempted and failed. The film dramatically portrays Kony's failure to show up to sign the Final Peace Agreement in April 2008 and details Kony's abduction and killing sprees in DRC, southern Sudan, and Central African Republic. The film concluded that Kony "is a man of war not peace." Invisible Children is holding rallies in Washington, D.C., Paris, London, Sydney, and Mexico City on April 24 to call attention to the plight of the children remaining in captivity.

BROWNING